

VZCZCXRO1410  
PP RUEHBI RUEHLMC  
DE RUEHLM #0766/01 2280643  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 150643Z AUG 08  
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8546  
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0583  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1048  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 8042  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 6216  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4509  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2225  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 4480  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3581  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8646  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6076  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2898  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000766

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/15/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [EAID](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: BOUCHER FINDS COMMITMENT TO MILITARY  
SOLUTION, NOT HUMAN RIGHTS, IN COLOMBO

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher's visit to Colombo for the SAARC summit on August 1-4, Sri Lankan government interlocutors made clear they were committed to a military solution to the conflict. The President, the Foreign Minister, the Defense Secretary, and several other key political figures insisted that defeating the Tamil Tigers militarily was the government's highest priority. The opposition leader, civil society leaders and journalists expressed grave reservations about the government's current course and about the human rights situation. The President, the Foreign Minister and others played down these concerns, alleging that the government's critics concocted many of the abuse allegations for political purposes. Boucher pressed the government for an improvement in human rights and urged pursuit of a political outreach strategy. The government pointed to its efforts to stabilize the East as evidence of its sincerity in reaching out to the Tamil and Muslim communities. Boucher welcomed those but said more is needed: disarm paramilitaries and extend democracy to all the citizens. He also suggested that "Track II" efforts to develop a political solution to the conflict could be useful to get the Tamil Diaspora to move away from support for the Tigers. End summary.

President Committed to Military Solution  
-----

¶2. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher and Ambassador Blake urged President Mahinda Rajapaksa to open up political space in parallel to the pursuit of his military goals. Rajapaksa responded that the government would have to defeat Tamil Tiger leader Prabhakaran first. Boucher noted Army Commander Sarath Fonseka's recent comments that even in the event the Tigers' conventional capability were destroyed, about 1000 rebels would remain to carry on a guerilla insurgency. The President dismissed the possibility. He appeared fully committed to pursuing a military solution to the conflict. He conceded, however, that a change in the Tiger's behavior was possible, citing the defections of former Tamil Tiger leaders Karuna and Pillaiyan (note: the latter even attended

the SAARC summit).

"East will be a model of democracy"

-----

13. (C) President Rajapaksa welcomed USAID and other U.S. assistance in stabilizing and developing the Eastern Province. Ambassador stressed that helping with livelihood projects is important to the U.S. and said we will continue to assist in this area. However, he urged the government to take quick action to demobilize the paramilitaries since government control of security is essential for private sector investment. The President countered that only 10 months had passed since government forces had regained control of the area from the Tigers. He said normalization in the region would take some time, noting that the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan had been going on for years. He assessed that the process of normalization and integration in the East would send a message to the North. He added that qualified ex-Tiger cadres would also be able to enter the army and police force. Boucher stressed the necessity for the government to implement the best possible political model in the East, and that it must be the police -- not the paramilitaries -- that control law and order. Later, in a separate meeting, the President's brother and senior adviser Basil Rajapaksa agreed on the goal of demobilization, but noted that the government cannot simply send fighters back home. He claimed that in some areas the paramilitaries are still needed to combat small pockets of Tamil Tiger cadres. However, he stressed that what is needed most now for the

COLOMBO 00000766 002 OF 004

paramilitaries is vocational training. Basil stated that in an ideal situation these soldiers would receive training and then depart Sri Lanka for overseas employment.

14. (C) Boucher and Ambassador told President Rajapaksa that progress on human rights would help to instill hope for the future in the Tamil population. Boucher also noted to President Rajapaksa that it was in the President's and the country's interest to improve the human rights situation, and to publicize this change. However, Rajapaksa dismissed allegations of human rights abuses, claiming that the media and nongovernmental groups were inventing stories to attack him politically. He said that many of the journalists were fabricating accounts of abductions and torture to bolster claims for refugee status abroad, and claimed that prominent journalists who have criticized the government sharply have not suffered. He praised the independence and integrity of the Sri Lankan court system.

Government dismisses reports of human rights abuses

-----

15. (C) In a meeting with Foreign Minister Bogollagama, the Assistant Secretary and Ambassador also expressed strong concern about the human rights situation, citing reports by independent organizations and the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons. Bogollagama expressed confidence in the ability of national institutions, rather than "outsiders" to address human rights issues, pointing to Sri Lanka's political opposition and independent media. When Boucher pressed for accountable police and the demobilization of the paramilitaries, Bogollagama assured us that the cadres had transformed into a respectable political party and that the police were maintaining law and order. Boucher offered U.S. support for humanitarian aid and Eastern stabilization. He strongly encouraged the government to address U.S. human rights concerns so that we could return to normal levels of security cooperation and assistance.

16. (C) Bogollagama described the President as committed to a political solution and maintaining good relations with minorities. He cited measures to reduce language barriers, the hiring and training of bilingual civil servants, and the recruitment of Tamil-speaking police officers in the East as

examples of the government's efforts. The Foreign Minister hailed the Eastern Province as a democratic model of three communities - Tamil, Muslim, Sinhalese - working together. He estimated that the government would need to invest about 1.8 billion U.S. dollars in Eastern development over the next few years, with a focus on schools, agriculture, and livelihood projects, especially for fishing communities.

#### Human Rights defenders report repression

-----

17. (C) Civil society members presented a different picture, reporting to Boucher on recent human rights abuses by government security forces military and paramilitary groups. Critics of the government live "never knowing when the axe is going to fall," said wife of imprisoned Sunday Times columnist J.S. Tissainayagam. The head of news for an independent TV station told us that the local-language press actively practices self-censorship, as even moderate journalists have been assaulted; perpetrators are rarely, if ever, made to answer for their actions in court. The publishing of private articles on official websites of the names of "traitors" such as critics of the government and human rights activists is tantamount to incitement to violence, said P. Saravanamuttu of the Center for Policy Alternatives.

18. (C) A former Secretary to several Commissions of Inquiry on disappearances told us he resigned when he concluded the

COLOMBO 00000766 003 OF 004

Commissions were unwilling or unable to conduct serious investigations into abductions of Tamils. The head of a legal aid organization said that in the East, there is little judicial capacity to deal with detention cases under the emergency regulations. The detainees therefore remain imprisoned for long periods of time without recourse. Attacks on Christian churches have risen, while a draft anti-conversion law is already being implemented in advance in some districts, noted a Christian activist. Boucher expressed U.S. support for human rights organizations and individuals who have the courage and perseverance to pursue their work even at risk to themselves. Our interlocutors expressed appreciation for forthright U.S. statements on the human rights situation and urged us to continue our efforts to protect media workers and human rights defenders.

#### Undermining the Tigers among the Tamil Diaspora

-----

19. (C) Boucher stressed the importance of reaching out to the Tamil Diaspora as part of "Track II" efforts to find a political, not military, solution to the conflict. Presidential advisor Basil Rajapaksa said the government has a good story to tell the Diaspora about the East. He noted that within two months there will be no internally displaced persons in the East; all will be resettled. The government procured seeds and tractors, and is assisting with irrigation to help farmers grow rice paddy and rebuild their livelihoods. Minister for Export Development and International Trade G.L. Peiris and Tourism Minister Milinda Moragoda agreed that demonstrating a link between progress in the East and a positive trajectory for Sri Lanka as a whole might help reduce Diaspora financing of Tamil Tiger activities.

110. (C) Peiris outlined three of the President's primary political concerns that negotiations for a final peace agreement must address: a) a plan for the decommissioning of weapons and soldiers; b) inclusion of other Tamil groups (exclusive talks with the Tigers are not possible); and c) an agreement by the Tigers to contest future elections. However, Basil, Peiris, and Moragoda all noted that direct peace talks are unlikely in the near future.

Opposition leader doubts reports of military success

-----

¶11. (C) Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said that he had spoken with Sri Lankan Army brigadiers who cast doubt on the glowing reports of military victories. According to Wickremesinghe, the military is simply occupying land that the Tigers vacated; in effect, the Tigers are controlling Army movements with strategic withdrawals. He pointed out the risk of a repeat of 1993, when the Tigers conceded ground until the Army was spread too thin, then struck back. He noted that soldiers on leave increasingly fail to return. As a result, he said, battlefield commanders are no longer granting leave in order to prevent desertions. Wickremesinghe noted that the Tigers were continuing to re-supply through ports on the northeast coast such as Mullaitivu. He reported that some of Pillaiyan's cadres in the East have rejoined the Tamil Tigers.

¶12. (C) Wickremesinghe described to Boucher and Ambassador a bleak economic situation where the gross domestic product remains high only due to "baseless growth" while input costs are up. He cast government stability as a "political race between economic suffering and the military process." Wickremesinghe urged the international community to "intervene strongly" on governmental abuses of human rights and media freedom -- both of which, he said, are a sign of a struggling administration's desperation. He urged the U.S. and the other Sri Lanka Co-Chairs redouble their efforts on

COLOMBO 00000766 004 OF 004

behalf of power-sharing. Wickremesinghe assessed that the Tamil National Alliance, which shares some of the political objectives of the Tigers, was the most viable alternative to the Tigers. He believed that in a free and fair election the Tamil National Alliance would be the majority party in the North. He said discussions were continuing with the Alliance on whether to engage in the devolution discussions. Wickremesinghe told us that he had assured All Party Representative Committee Chairman Tissa Vitharana that if the Alliance were to engage in drafting a proposal, the United National Party would also participate and endorse any credible devolution plan that emerged.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: Until recently, the Sri Lankan government had said that its strategy was to weaken the Tigers first, then force them to the negotiating table. Perhaps due the Sri Lankan military's recent advances, the government's stance on this seems to have toughened considerably over the last several months, with all other priorities now taking a back seat to the pursuit of a military victory over the Tigers. This emphasis on a military solution also underpins the government's domestic political strategy, which depends on maintaining the widespread public perception in the Sinhalese south that the government is on track to win the war. However, the government appears unable to hear the voices calling for a viable power-sharing plan as the political counterpart to its military strategy. We and most other observers remain convinced that this would be the best way to undermine the Tigers' support base both within Sri Lanka and among the large and influential Tamil Diaspora.

¶14. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher cleared this message.  
BLAKE